

MACBITER

Wasting away

After a lifetime spent hunched over his computer, a morose MacBiter belatedly realises that all his efforts have amounted to diddly-squat

It was when I was sitting in front of my Mac last week, fooling around on some no-hoper project, as you do, that a still, small voice within me spoke thus:

"MacBiter old chum [it said], you've been sitting in front of a personal computer of one kind or another virtually non-stop for about 24 years now. During that time your hair has turned grey, the morose wrinkles at the corners of your gob have deepened, you have warts, boils and haemorrhoids, your joints are so bad you practically live on glucosamine and your social skills have declined to vanishing point. Don't you think you should put all this junk aside for half an hour and go get yourself a life?"

So good did this advice seem that I promptly stood up, said something hearty and optimistic like "Right ho!", put on a coat and stepped outside my front door in order to acquire myself a life.

I wouldn't have minded being a spectator of what happened next, but as the chief participant it was no fun. Halfway up the steps I slipped, the MacFeet shot out from beneath me, I performed a mid-air cartwheel and the MacRibcage came down crunch on the edge of the brickwork. Far from getting a life, I got two broken ribs, and I never made it further into the great world than the top step. Just to let you know how great this experience has been, I also have the back end of the flu, and the cough-that-won't-quit is like a stiletto in my side.

What has been particularly eerie about the whole thing is that the only position in which I feel remotely comfortable is – guess where? Sitting bolt upright in front of my Mac. Working.

BE SEEING YOU

It's like the plot of *The Prisoner*. The mysterious, luxurious prison from which escape is impossible. No harm can come to you so long as you submit to being banged up, but the moment you break for home weird adversaries and bad luck blight your chances. Best not to make a run for it in the first place.

OK, OK, I've learned my lesson. But all the same, the inner voice



was right. Twenty-four years in front of a succession of VDUs (from 9" black and white through to 20" 24-bit flat panel, by way of a succession of monstrous and flaky giant VDUs, including the Radius Pivot of evil memory) is too much. It's over a third of my lifespan to date, for God's sake! And how much of this activity has led to profit? Not enough.

I can think of the projects I have worked on that have actually made a bit of cash here and there, articles and columns I have written and so forth, and I can say, yes, they paid off. I made a crust. But then again, I am the man who once spent an entire year doing nothing but fool around with HyperCard, in the devout belief that this product's future and that of the Mac were contiguous. What did I know? I got heavily involved in CD-ROM book publishing, until it became clear to all concerned – me last of all – that this idea was and would remain a non-starter. If you throw in all the games, utilities and other time-fillers you can see that for me – and I would guess, for you also – most of the hours and years devoted to my computer have been a big fat waste of a young life.

PORT SHORT

If God had wanted us to interface with digital devices, he would have provided us with a USB port instead of a navel. I mean, it's not

natural, is it? Think of all those hundreds of millennia in which our anthropoid ancestors painfully developed the opposed thumb, discovered fire and invented the game of golf – all those landmarks of a species gradually becoming more civilised. Was it all for this? That we, the ultimate refinement of the human species, should spend such large proportions of our lives engaging in this pointless and demeaning activity? What if one day they switched on the national grid and nothing happened?

On the other hand, I have to ask myself what else I might have done with those missing 24 years. Back in those days I was an ex-rock journalist, living in rural squalor and dead broke. I had once been a pro musician but never a brilliant one. The thought of going back to either of these former careers frankly made me shudder. Prospects looked bleak. Then along came computers, and the fascinating idea of being able to send a memo to a piece of equipment and have it do something in response. Even more than the mighty Hammond organ, it was the perfect bluffer's device. I was hooked.

BACK TO BASICS

I reckon trying to teach myself to program used up the first three years all on its own. I learned Atari Basic, BBC Basic, Commodore Basic and Sinclair Basic, and was crap at

all of them (I never dared tackle the built-in BBC Assembler). The slightest lapse of concentration and the thing would get away from me. Also, even if it all ran, it was rubbish and not worth the sweat. But just as I was thinking of bailing out and taking up golf instead, the Mac appeared.

Even so, the programming urge died hard. The first Mac review I ever wrote (in 1985) was of Microsoft Basic – I even wrote some picture-handling routines for it that subsequently turned up in a book of Mac tips – and a year later, along came the earliest iteration of HyperCard, which can be seen as the true ancestor of HTML and all other hypertext languages, or a big fat red herring that suckered thousands of Mac users up a blind alley for years. Or both.

The HyperCard frenzy lasted until about 1990, by which time colour Macs of great power were well established. Fooling around with various paint programs – even if I couldn't print the results – occupied another couple of years. Playing with the first versions of Illustrator and Photoshop was a joy – even if, due to the fact that I have zero graphic skills, they led nowhere. In recent years, I've done a lot of work on sequencers and sound production software – all of it a complete waste of time. Only QuarkXPress, probably the least groovy of all major software packages, was of use to me in practical terms – and Microsoft Word, of course. How dull is that?

So discounting about four years out of the 24 in which my computing efforts may be said to have earned their keep, that leaves a score of years in which my only real gain from all this key-clicking and mouse-prodding has been to delay the painful realisation that I am, after all, a thoroughly talentless individual.

Take my advice – don't let it take you that long. **CS**

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